

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 292

Volume 292

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**

Lawrence J. Trudeau

Editor



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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. The great poets, novelists, short-story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey of an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Volumes 1 through 87 of TCLC featured authors who died between 1900 and 1959; beginning with Volume 88, the series expanded to include authors who died between 1900 and 1999. Beginning with Volume 26, every fourth volume of TCLC was devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers. With TCLC 285, the series returns to a standard author approach, with some entries devoted to a single important work of world literature and others devoted to literary topics.

TCLC is part of the survey of criticism and world literature that is contained in Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), *Shakespearean Criticism* (SC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC).

Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the author's name (if applicable).
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication information of each work is given. In the case of works not published in English, a translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is a published translated title or a

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- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors who have appeared in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in *TCLC* as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Drama Criticism*, *Poetry Criticism*, *Short Story Criticism*, and *Children's Literature Review*.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of titles published in other languages and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, plays, nonfiction books, and poetry, short-story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as Modern Language Association (MLA) style or University of Chicago Press style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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Kuester, Martin. "Myth and Postmodernist Turn in Canadian Short Fiction: Sheila Watson, 'Antigone' (1959)." *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations*. Ed. Reginald M. Nischik. Rochester: Camden House, 2007. 163-74. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 206. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 227-32. Print.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Advisory Board xiii

Arna Bontemps 1902-1973	1
<i>American novelist, children's author, poet, biographer, playwright, and editor</i>	
Morley Callaghan 1903-1990	83
<i>Canadian short-story writer, journalist, autobiographer, and playwright</i>	
Thomas Mann 1875-1955	143
<i>Entry devoted to the novel Doctor Faustus (1947)</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 345

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 465

TCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 487

TCLC-292 Title Index 495

Arna Bontemps

1902-1973

(Born Arnaud Wendell Bontemps) American novelist, children's author, poet, biographer, playwright, and editor.

The following entry provides criticism of Bontemps's life and works. For further information about Bontemps, see *CLC*, Volumes 1 and 18.

INTRODUCTION

Bontemps is known for writing poems, novels, and children's literature that reflect his lifelong commitment to recording and honoring African American culture and experience. A teacher and librarian for most of his career, he regarded his writing as a teaching tool. He was a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, the flourishing of black artistic creativity in New York City during the 1920s and 1930s, and his poetry was admired by such luminaries of the movement as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, as well as Richard Wright and others among the next generation of African American writers. Bontemps began his literary career in the mid 1920s as a poet, publishing in Harlem-based journals. His first novel, *God Sends Sunday* (1931), attracted attention for its unflattering portrayal of African American life, and his second, *Black Thunder* (1936), about the failed slave revolt of Gabriel Prosser, later became his most celebrated novel. Bontemps's writings for children, which include historical and biographical works as well as fiction, have been praised for both their literary sophistication and their educational value with regard to African American history and culture. He wrote several childrens' works in collaboration with Hughes or Irish American author Jack Conroy, and all sold well during Bontemps's lifetime.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bontemps was born on 13 October 1902 in Alexandria, Louisiana, to Paul Bontemps, a bricklayer, and his wife Maria Carolina (née Pembroke), a schoolteacher. In a 1965 autobiographical essay quoted by Douglas Flamming (1999), Bontemps wrote, "mine had not been a varmint-infested childhood so often the hallmark of Negro American autobiography. My parents and grandparents had been well-fed, well-clothed, and well-housed." When Bontemps was four years old, his father decided to move the family to California in search of greater opportunity. In Los Angeles, Paul Bontemps became increasingly religious, even-

tually becoming a pastor in the Seventh-Day Adventist church. He sent his son to an Adventist high school and college, hoping he would study to become a doctor.

Although Bontemps was frequently the only nonwhite child in his class at school, he did not face much direct racial discrimination. However, he felt that the African American experience was erased or ignored in his classes at school and in the books he read. In a 1948 speech quoted by Joseph Downing Thompson, Jr. (2000; see Further Reading), Bontemps stated that the situation seemed to give the impression that "the Negro had no history," emphasizing that this "was a contention that any school boy could establish by merely opening his history book. Where was the Negro mentioned? What was said about him?" Meanwhile, Bontemps's father, who, according to Flamming, "had forsaken his Afro-southern roots in an effort to become colorless," urged Bontemps not to "go up there acting colored" when he started boarding school at about fifteen years old. In response to the effacement he witnessed and experienced as a child, Bontemps spent much of his adult life seeking to record and publicize African Americans' heritage.

One way Bontemps managed to establish contact with his Southern and African American roots was through his great-uncle John "Buddy" Ward, who moved to California when Bontemps was still young. Buddy, about whom Bontemps wrote several essays, told many stories of the South and fueled his grandnephew's imagination. As a college student, Bontemps discovered the works of the Jamaican American author Claude McKay and was inspired to become a writer. In 1924, he published his first poem, "Hope," in the *Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and decided to move to Harlem to join the flourishing African American artistic community there. In Harlem, he quickly became friends with many of the artists central to the movement known as the Harlem Renaissance—Hughes, who became a lifelong friend and collaborator, as well as Cullen, W. E. B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and McKay. Bontemps taught at an Adventist school in Harlem, and while there he met his wife, Alberta Johnson, with whom he would have six children.

In 1931, Bontemps published *God Sends Sunday* and moved to Huntsville, Alabama, to teach at the Adventist Oakwood Junior College. This was Bontemps's first experience living in the South since his early childhood, and he immersed himself in local culture, visiting rural churches

and seeking out singers and storytellers. In Alabama, Bontemps began writing children's stories, sometimes in collaboration with other writers, and he also started work on *Black Thunder*. In 1934, he was forced to leave Oakwood, the leaders of which considered his ideas too radical. He moved to Chicago, where he taught and worked as an editorial supervisor on the Federal Writers' Project. In 1943, he received a master's degree in library science from the University of Chicago and accepted a position as the librarian for Fisk University, a historically black college in Tennessee, where he worked until his retirement in 1965. After he retired, Bontemps held visiting professorships at the University of Illinois and Yale University, and he returned to Fisk as a writer in residence. He continued to publish short stories, children's books, and historical nonfiction, and to edit anthologies of African American poetry and folklore until his death on 4 June 1973.

MAJOR WORKS

Bontemps's first published works were poems, several of which won contests sponsored by African American magazines during the 1920s. Most of the poems, though they were considered less overtly political and experimental than those by other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, expressed African American themes. Daniel Reagan (1996) argued that Bontemps was nevertheless an important participant in "a collective project to define the aesthetic and ideological terms upon which African-American poetry should be written," particularly in terms of negotiating "racial identity." Bontemps's most famous poems include "A Black Man Talks of Reaping," which employs images of farming to suggest that African Americans are not able to harvest the fruits of their labors, and "Nocturne at Bethesda," which mourns spiritual loss and suggests that salvation may be found "beneath the palms of Africa."

Bontemps is perhaps better known for his poetry anthologies that include the work of other important black writers than for his own poetry. Publishing his first poem in the NAACP's *Crisis* in August of 1924 helped him to solidify his determination to become a professional writer, after which he submitted poems regularly to magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Collier's*. His first poetry anthology and most noteworthy contribution to children's poetry is *Golden Slippers: An Anthology of Negro Poetry for Young Readers* (1941), which also features the work of significant black writers such as Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Georgia Douglass Johnson, and Mary Effie Lee Newsome. *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949*, coedited with Hughes in 1949, was, according to Bontemps's biographer Kirkland C. Jones (1992; see Further Reading), "considered by critics to be the most comprehensive anthology of African American poetry yet assembled, even surpassing James Weldon Johnson's 1922 work, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*." A revised and expanded edi-

tion, published twenty-one years later, extended the timeline of the first volume, ending in 1970.

Bontemps began to concentrate on prose writing in the 1930s. *God Sends Sunday* relates the tale of Little Augie, a New Orleans jockey who experiences a period of fabulous luck at the racetrack before losing everything. Augie bears a close resemblance to Bontemps's uncle Buddy. Bontemps later wrote *St. Louis Woman* (1946), a play based on *God Sends Sunday*, which had a brief but successful run.

Black Thunder is a historical fiction based on an attempted slave revolt that took place in Virginia in 1800. The novel connects the Gabriel Prosser Conspiracy, in which a mistreated slave in eighteenth-century Virginia mounted a failed insurrection, to historic struggles for freedom elsewhere, including the French Revolution and the slave uprising in Haiti led by Toussaint Louverture, as well as the aspirations of Jeffersonian politicians in the United States. Bontemps's third novel, *Drums at Dusk* (1939), is set in Haiti during the revolutionary period. During the 1930s, Bontemps also wrote short stories, including "A Summer Tragedy," which tells the story of two elderly sharecroppers in failing health who choose to commit suicide. This story and others from the period were collected in *The Old South* (1973).

In 1932, working in collaboration with Hughes, Bontemps wrote a children's book, *Popo and Fifina*, which recounts the adventures of a young Haitian brother and sister. The story was an immediate success, and its rapid sales encouraged Bontemps to continue writing children's literature for the duration of his career. Some of his better known works of children's fiction include *You Can't Pet a Possum* (1934), a tale about a young boy who adopts a dog that is notable, according to Ione Morrison Rider (1939), for its successful resolution of "the problem of freeing the natural rhythms of colloquial speech from the tyranny of traditional renderings," and *Sad-Faced Boy* (1937), a story about a young boy who travels to New Orleans to play his trumpet, only to end up playing at the devil's ball, an experience that helps him appreciate the value of his Alabama home. Bontemps also wrote nonfiction works aimed at elucidating African American history for young readers. The best known of these, *Story of the Negro* (1948), presents the history of Africans since Egyptian times and was awarded the Jane Addams Children's Book Award in 1956.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Bontemps was one of the most notable Harlem Renaissance writers, winning several prizes for his early poems. His novels, however, met with mixed reviews. The prominent African American author and editor of the *Crisis*, DuBois, as quoted by Flammang, said of *God Sends*

Sunday: "There is a certain pathetic touch to the painting of his poor little jockey hero, but nearly all else is sordid crime, drinking, gambling, whore-mongering, and murder. There is not a decent intelligent woman; not a single man with the slightest ambition or real education, scarcely more than one human child in the whole book." On the whole, however, critics have tended to praise Bontemps's dedication to portraying the African American experience in a respectful and positive manner. Flamming asserted that he "never wavered in his belief that 'colored' representations . . . were much-needed in literature."

Among Bontemps's novels, *Black Thunder* is notable, as Christine Levecq (2000) pointed out, as one of the earliest "African American historical novels about slavery." Bontemps's treatment of history and language in the novel has been a frequent focus of critical study. Mary Kemp Davis (1989), for instance, argued that his choice for the novel's title "subtly signals the primary rhetorical strategy of this historical novel: the privileging of *his* text" of the attempted slave rebellion, and that the novel's language emphasizes the agency of the black characters. Jill Leroy-Frazier (2010) noted that Bontemps also emphasized the historical and political agency of black Southerners by portraying "the plantation order as unstable and under threat of collapse long before the Civil War." Levecq asserted that *Black Thunder* is shaped by two competing modes of relating history, noting the "tension between historical specificity and linearity on the one hand, and timeless appeal on the other."

Bontemps's children's literature has also received critical attention. While his contemporaries praised the charm of his stories and their vivid language, recent criticism has focused on Bontemps's larger ideological goals. Nancy D. Tolson (2001), for example, argued that Bontemps sought in his children's literature to reflect "the experience of Black culture from within Black culture," providing an authentic cultural base that is often missing from black children's literature. Laura Gray-Rosendale (2001) characterized Bontemps's *Sad-Faced Boy* as a more political work than was previously thought and as an "oppositional text" in the sense that it questioned traditional portrayals of African Americans.

Abigail Mann

PRINCIPAL WORKS

"Hope." *Crisis* Aug. 1924: 176. (Poetry)

God Sends Sunday. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931. (Novel)

Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti. With Langston Hughes. New York: Macmillan, 1932. (Children's fiction)

You Can't Pet a Possum. New York: Morrow, 1934. (Children's fiction)

Black Thunder. New York: Macmillan, 1936. (Novel)

Sad-Faced Boy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937. (Children's fiction)

Drums at Dusk. New York: Macmillan, 1939. (Novel)

Father of the Blues: An Autobiography by W. C. Handy. By W. C. Handy. Ed. Arna Bontemps. New York: Macmillan, 1941. (Autobiography)

Golden Slippers: An Anthology of Negro Poetry for Young Readers. Ed. Bontemps. New York: Harper, 1941. (Poetry)

The Fast Sooner Hound. With Jack Conroy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942. (Children's fiction)

They Seek a City. With Conroy. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1945. Rev. and expanded ed. *Anyplace but Here*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1966. (History)

We Have Tomorrow. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1945. (Biography)

St. Louis Woman. With Countee Cullen. Martin Beck Theatre, New York. 30 Mar. 1946. (Play)

Slappy Hooper, the Wonderful Sign Painter. With Conroy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946. (Children's fiction)

Story of the Negro. New York: Knopf, 1948. Expanded ed. New York: Knopf, 1955. (History)

Free and Easy. Theatre Carré, Amsterdam. 15 Dec. 1949. (Play)

**The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949*. Ed. Bontemps and Hughes. Garden City: Doubleday, 1949. Rev. and expanded ed. *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1970*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1970. (Poetry)

George Washington Carver. Evanston: Row, Peterson, 1950. (Biography)

Chariot in the Sky: A Story of the Jubilee Singers. Philadelphia: Winston, 1951. (Biography)

Sam Patch, the High, Wide, and Handsome Jumper. With Conroy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951. (Children's fiction)

The Story of George Washington Carver. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1954. (Biography)

Lonesome Boy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955. (Children's fiction)

The Book of Negro Folklore. Ed. Bontemps and Hughes. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1958. (Folklore)

Frederick Douglass: Slave, Fighter, Freeman. New York: Knopf, 1959. (Biography)

100 Years of Negro Freedom. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1961. (Biographies and history)

American Negro Poetry. Ed. Bontemps. New York: Hill and Wang, 1963. Rev. ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974. (Poetry)

Personals. London: Breman, 1963. (Poetry)

Famous Negro Athletes. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1964. (Biographies)

I, Too, Sing America: Famous American Negroes. With Hughes. Dortmund: Lensing, 1964. (Biographies)

Great Slave Narratives. Ed. Bontemps. Boston: Beacon, 1969. (Autobiographies and biographies)

Hold Fast to Dreams: Poems Old and New Selected by Arna Bontemps. Ed. Bontemps. Chicago: Follett, 1969. (Poetry)

Mr. Kelso's Lion. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970. (Children's fiction)

Free at Last: The Life of Frederick Douglass. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971. (Biography)

The Pasteboard Bandit. With Hughes. New York: Oxford UP, 1971. (Children's fiction)

The Harlem Renaissance Remembered: Essays. Ed. Bontemps. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972. (Essays)

Young Booker: Booker T. Washington's Early Days. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972. (Biography)

‡*The Old South: "A Summer Tragedy" and Other Stories of the Thirties*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1973. (Short stories)

Arna Bontemps—Langston Hughes Letters, 1925-1967. Ed. Charles H. Nichols. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1980. (Letters)

*Includes "A Black Man Talks of Reaping," first published in 1926; and "Nocturne at Bethesda" and "The Return," both first published in 1927.

‡Includes "A Summer Tragedy."

CRITICISM

Arna Bontemps (essay date 1939)

SOURCE: Bontemps, Arna. "Sad-Faced Author." *Horn Book Magazine* Jan.-Dec. 1939: 7-12. Print.

[In the following essay, Bontemps recalls the events that led to his writing *Sad-Faced Boy*, describing how he befriended a quartet of young singers while living in rural Alabama and shared stories of Harlem with them. Three decided to visit Harlem; later, their accounts of this experience there provided the inspiration for Bontemps's novel.]

That year, our first in northern Alabama, we lived beside a country road that was so red it might have been made of brick dust. We had a neighbor on our left, an old friend who with his family had preceded us to Madison County; but on our right there was a stony field and beyond that an abandoned sawmill. Across the road there was a half-mile wide cow pasture at the end of which the woods began and a line of mysterious dark hills.

In summer the weather was intolerably hot. The individual who built the cottage in which we lived, familiar with Alabama suns, had put the hot water tank above the ceiling and against the roof. "You'll have plenty of hot water without a fire," he promised us, recommending the house. "During the hottest months the sun will heat that roof so hot you'll have to cool the water off when you draw it in your bath tub." The amount of exaggeration was slight and unimportant. The summer scorched us.

I took my typewriter out of doors and worked on a card table on the shady side of the house. At first I was concerned about appearances, but humility is the result of hot weather. My shirt was discarded the first week. Later socks disappeared. Finally the vanity of shaving was conquered. A typewriter, a few sheets of paper, a towel and a fly swatter were the only items of indispensable importance. Once an hour, perhaps, the screen door banged and Joan or Paul slipped around the corner with ice water or lemonade.

We bore up grimly, but it was a waste of strength. Those who had been there longer, the Negro field hands, for example, had a better way of meeting the conditions. I saw one black boy driving his mules down to a low field and carrying an alarm clock stuffed into a big overall pocket. When I joked him about it, he said it was to wake him up in case he decided to take a nap. A skinny little brat with a shaved head brought a hungry-looking herd to graze on the roadside. The boy himself rolled in the tall grass, slept profoundly through the most oppressive hours.

Eventually wind and rain came, blackening the sky, uprooting trees and cooling the air. Lightning silenced our radio. We got some sleep, and I began to dream and wonder about the wooded hills beyond the cow pasture. I imagined a fairy land beyond those hills, the ambassador of which was the spidery black boy with the herd of grotesque, almost fantastic, milk cows and heifers. But fairy lands are not entered at will. Entrance is by passport, and the passport is sympathy.

My chance came after a Sunday on which I attended the annual footwashing at the Primitive Baptist Church in Huntsville. Country people were there by the hundred. Overalled elders, girded with towels, paraded up and down the aisles, followed by deaconesses in angel-white. Wet, bare feet, leaping from the tin wash pans, danced savagely on the splashed floor, while the moaning and the

shouting reached heaven. The next morning an ancient man the color of a hickory nut and just as firm and strong unhooked our gate and called me to the doorsteps.

"Seen you at the footwashing," he said pleasantly.

I admitted that I loved singing and shouting and bench-walking and all that. Of course I couldn't join in so well—except in the singing—but my heart was right. If ever I got the proper feeling, I'd try not be ashamed to shout.

So I liked good singing, hunh? Well, they had some first rate singers over their way, beyond the hills. Maybe some Sunday—

"Maybe nothing!" I put in hurriedly. "I'm dying to hear them, and no maybe-so."

He wasn't very definite, old man Moore, but he had all the time in the world and dozens of other things to talk about. There were his memories of slavery and the Civil War, and his service with the Yankees in an Indiana regiment that was at one time stationed right there in Huntsville. He was still excited about the Athens to Huntsville coach road that used to run across those wooded hills and about the way in which the coachman would blow his horn so loudly when he reached the summit that the blast could be heard six miles away in Huntsville. Then there was the period, following the war, when he himself drove the mail carriage on a rural route in that same section. His career in the mail service seemed to have been bound up with the lifetime of a proud horse the old fellow had owned.

"But I'll talk yo' arm off if I stay here," he said, so finally I let him get away.

Then it was that the singers came, four boys, including the sleepy young herdsman I already knew. His name turned out to be J. P. Morgan, and he was the lead singer in the quartet which included also three of his cousins. Their first song was, in part—

Back, back train
And get yo'
Heavy load, O Lawdy,
Back, back train
And get yo'
Heavy load.

For the Lawdy's gonna carry us all-a,
In his arms he's gonna
Carry us saf-a-ly home.

I was, of course, enthralled. The old train whistled at the proper time. A shuffling of the boys' feet suggested the grinding of wheels on the rails, and an old guitar, with a rawhide string to suspend it around the skinny boy's neck, furnished the necessary chords. There were also sad songs like

You may meet yo' mother at the landin',
Stand there just the same;

I'm gonna put off my earthly garment,
Put on my heavenly robe.

There were gay ones like

My money don't never give out;
Rich food is making me stout.
If my money was piled up high,
I b'lieve it would touch the sky—
My money don't never give out.

And even love songs like

Let me make me
A pallet on the flo',
And I'll never, never leave
Yo' lovin' arms no mo'.

My family, consisting then of Joan and Paul and my wife, came out and insisted on hearing my private singers. Our neighbors on the left leaned across the fence so hungrily that I got soft-hearted and called them over to our yard. I felt selfish and possessive about my entertainers and let it be known that I shared them grudgingly. In the days that followed I took down some of the boys' songs and sent them to a musician friend. They continued to sing, but later the boys talked about as much as they sang. I was curious about their "kin people" on the other side of the hills. They told me everything I asked. I had not suspected, however, that they had some questions of their own up their sleeves—such as their sleeves were.

They wanted to know about this Harlem place that people talked about. How about those subways and elevated trains, those apartment houses?

I obliged them willingly and made it all, God forgive me, as gaudy as I could make it. Moreover, I assured them, many boys no older than they had gone to old, tall, high-stepping, good-looking Harlem and gotten along beautifully, especially boys with a guitar and some good songs.

Soon afterwards we missed our friends. One of the two tall boys in the quartet came over to say that the other three had disappeared, wandered off some place. He was not excited. Back there behind the hills it was not uncommon for boys to strike out and make long journeys. The boy who stayed behind had been plowing when the others decided to leave. They hadn't bothered to notify him. It was just as casual as that. None of the "kin people" were disturbed, I was assured. J. P. and the others would write. They might have been visiting relatives in Nashville.

Two or three months passed. Before we knew it, December had come and an old possum was making his headquarters in a persimmon tree near the sawmill. Paul and I were exasperated because it was the best persimmon tree around and apparently the possum was aiming to get more of the fruit than he was willing to allow us. We planned to put the

dogs on him. But in the midst of our designs J. P. Morgan returned.

"Great day, boy, where you been?" I asked him.

He told me calmly how he had, with the other two boys, made his way to Harlem and what he had done up there. Things had gone well at first. They had earned pennies, nickels, dimes and even quarters by their songs. All that I had said about Harlem was true; I stood all right with them. But still the trip had turned out unhappily. It was the cold weather that really ruined them. And some of the boys up there in New York were so mean and tricky an unsuspecting stranger found it hard to get along.

"Well, what did the weather have to do with it?" I asked.

J. P. looked particularly downcast when forced to recall the episode. It seemed that city boys had overpowered the little musicians and taken their money on several occasions. The climax came when J. P. had a fine new pair of shoes taken right off his feet. It was an unheard-of indignity. He almost cried when he told it. Immediately thereafter he and the other two decided that home was a good place to be. So, in colder weather, they had returned as they left—barefooted. Still there remained with the boy the memory of their musical triumph. He had not lost the proud, pinching recollection of a grand, noisy, shiny pair of city shoes. J. P. had outfitted himself with them on his own money at the crest of the trio's success.

Music received a temporary set-back along the road. A horrible silence persisted day and night. I became cross and irritable. One of the children suggested that perhaps I was about ready to start another story—the way I acted.

"I'm afraid that's what's the matter with me," I confessed. "I feel it coming on."

They wanted to know if it would help for them to remain very quiet while I wrote. That was a signal for me to stamp both feet. The place was already so silent that a person couldn't collect his thoughts. I wanted them both to play in the room where I was working and, for heaven's sake, to make some noise. They obliged me completely, but still it was some time—with one interruption and another—before J. P. Morgan became Slumber and before his two companions were christened Rags and Willie in *Sad-Faced Boy*.

Ione Morrison Rider (essay date 1939)

SOURCE: Rider, Ione Morrison. "Arna Bontemps." *Horn Book Magazine* Jan.-Dec. 1939: 13-19. Print.

[In the following essay, Rider summarizes several of Bontemps's children's books. She describes *Popo and Fifina* as offering vivid, poetic views of life in Jamaica and asserts that *You Can't Pet a Possum* represents Bontemps's attempt to free "the natural rhythms of colloquial speech

from the tyranny of traditional renderings," a challenge explored even more fully in *Sad-Faced Boy*.]

When that delectable story of Haiti, *Popo and Fifina*, by Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes, was published in 1932 by Macmillan, Anne T. Eaton spoke in the *New York Times* of wishing "that all travel books for children might be written by poets."

Certainly children were fortunate when *two* poets collaborated in this engaging account of a peasant family and its casual move from the lonely hillside farm to a seacoast town where Papa Jean had decided to become a fisherman.

Langston Hughes, young Negro poet, novelist and short-story writer, had contributed that same year to children's literature an attractive selection from his poems called *The Dream Keeper* (Knopf).

Arna Bontemps's poetry was known to followers of contemporary verse in such anthologies as Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk*. He had to his credit a well-reviewed novel (*God Sends Sunday*, Harcourt, 1931), based on the career of Lil Augie, Negro jockey of the nineties. He was at work on a second novel, about the Richmond uprising in 1800 under the slave Gabriel. (*Black Thunder* was to be published by Macmillan in 1936 and acclaimed for its beauty both of conception and of execution.)

Although *Popo and Fifina* was Mr. Bontemps's first appearance in children's literature, it is safe to predict that his name will have a place for many years to come on lists of the best contemporary writing for children.

This Popo was a lovable, ardent eight-year-old. His sister Fifina was ten, good-natured and resourceful. Mamma Jean was no chatterer; "H'm," was her comment when pleased. She cooked on a small charcoal stove in the bare yard of their one-room cabin. Clothes were pounded clean beside a mountain stream that trickled down the street center. The children took part in the work of the simple household, minding baby Pensia, gathering soap-weed, catching crabs, washing dishes and kettles at the street-corner fountain. And although he worked hard all day netting fish in the bay to sell at the market, Papa Jean heeded a boy's plea and fashioned a fine red kite that flew proudly and sang on its cord.

The book sings, too, and is full of rich tropical color. So simple is the telling that children accept as natural the warm sleepy sunlight, long blue twilights, a sudden violent thunder-storm; thatched roofs, mangoes, almond trees, gay-colored parrots and butterflies, and the vibrant music of midnight drums in the forest.

Great joy was Popo's when he entered Uncle Jacques's cabinet shop to learn to fashion things of wood. He pondered this entrancing new world. How, he asked old man Durand, could new designs be made every day and without patterns? The old artisan explained that you "put yourself